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ASPECTUAL COMPOSITION: SURVEYING THE INGREDIENTS

Abstract. This paper discusses some of the ways in which the notion of compositionality is understood in the literature. It will argued that on a strict (Fregean) view a verb has a constant meaning to make in the aspectual composition independently from the information contributed by its arguments, that the VP (verb+internal argument/complement) forms a substantive aspectual unit that should be recognizable as such complex aspectual information; and finally, that aspectual composition forces Discourse Representation Theory into revising the way states and events are taken.

Keywords. Aspectuality, composition, terminativity, DRT, aspectual classes, state, event.

1. INTRODUCTION

The notion of aspectual composition belongs in the wider perspective of developments in two domains of research. The first domain harbours the tradition of the so-called Fregean compositionality. This has been a very important compass in semantics and as the title of my 1971- dissertation On the Compositionality of the Aspects suggests, I was guided by it, although I did not have first-hand knowledge of Frege’s work at the time. My first contact with Fregean compositionality was via the Katz/Fodor-semantics of the sixties which expressed Frege’s ideas on building the complex meaning of phrases and sentences on the basis of their smaller parts. It was that insight of Frege’s that—in after the collapse of the markerese semantics provoked by Lewis (1972)—turned out to be common ground for the philosophical-logical tradition that took over semantics in the seventies. I have always considered aspectual composition as part of this broader tradition whose major players are well-known: Frege, Russell, Carnap, Quine, Montague, among many others. It makes compositionality a guiding principle in the domain of aspectual phenomena, as it is in other semantic domains. Sometimes the fact that complex units are to be taken as more than the sum of their parts is used as an argument against Fregean compositionality. This objection is wide off the mark. After all, the existence of molecules did not prevent chemistry from looking at atoms as building blocks.

The second domain is linguistic. The notion of aspectual composition hovered already over the literature of the twenties discussed in my dissertation. It grew on trees, as the English proverb says, but the tragedy for my aspectual heroes of the late twenties, Poutsma and Jacobsohn, who in Poutsma (1926) and Jacobsohn (1933) were well aware of the non-atomic nature of aspectual information, was that there were no (syntactic) trees at the time. At the end of the sixties, I could decide
relatively easy that aspectuality should be treated on the basis of amalgamating the meanings of the verb and its arguments into larger units. This was due to the fact that since Chomsky (1957, 1965) the notion of phrase structure had been fully available, whereas it was still absent or at best rudimentary in the twenties and thirties. The idea of aspectual composition started to grow on trees.\footnote{Chomsky’s notion of recursivity comes from the same logical tradition that I mentioned earlier, so the idea of composing new complex structures on the basis of simpler ones had also a syntactic underpinning as clearly visible in the Katz/Fodor-semantics.} Phrase structure opens the way to a strict(-er) interpretation of Fregean compositionality.

The thesis that the meaning of a complex expression is computable on the basis of its constituent parts has been attacked in semantic “Gestalt-circles”.\footnote{Quite fiercely by Lakoff, e.g. in Margolis and Laurence (1999:413) and by some of the prototype theorists included in that collection. An interesting attempt to stick to compositionality in a cognitive approach in which gestalts are clearly recognized is Jackendoff (2002:378–94).} It seems to me that such attacks are too early. To continue the metaphor used above: a molecule is built from atoms by the way these are grouped together. So one cannot do away with Frege without taking into account constructional meanings, context information, or other ways of complementing the information that is present at first sight.

Let me explain this point in more detail with the help of Figure 1 in which the semantic information expressed by the features [±ADD1O] and [±SQA] may be taken as semantic atoms. The idea of the picture as a whole is that a Verb is specified for some semantic property, that it takes NP\textsubscript{2} which is also specified for some semantic property, that it forms a VP at which level a complex semantic object is construed, here labeled as [±T\textsubscript{VP}], that the VP combines with NP\textsubscript{1}, yielding a tenseless sentence S that carries the complex aspectual information labeled [±I\textsubscript{S}] and collected from the lower levels in the form of a complex semantic feature. Then this process comes to an end after which other principles are operative in a higher domain.

![Figure 1. Aspctual composition](image)

To mark this transition a distinction is made between inner and outer aspectuality. The [±ADD1O]-property of the verb expresses dynamic progress, change, nonstativity or whatever term is available to distinguish it from stative verbs, which have a minusvalue. The [±SQA]-feature expresses that the NP pertains to a specified